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IN* TANDEM

Christopher Davison > Urban Decay

By Georgia Suter

The drawings of Christopher Davison could keep you up at night—dark and visceral with narratives that flow freely from moments of striking metamorphosis. His series “End of Summer,” for example, depicts reclining figures entangled with their landscapes in ways both intimate and eerie: A figure births branches from his abdomen; a yellow woman is submerged in a landscape of organ-like plants. Born in a trailer in the small town of Gallipolis, Ohio, Davison started drawing as a child. His environments left quite an impression on him. His series “Cafe Royale” evokes a dark absurdism: Figures resembling exotic animals bordering on beasts walk amid primitive, sometimes tropical settings, and nature takes on a decisive demonism. Davison describes the development behind these works on his website: “This theme became overrun with darker imagery that seemed to want to bubble up after a holiday break in Ohio filled with conversations about religion.”

While personal experience plays its role in providing ideas, Davison’s urban surroundings have brought a special inspiration, as well. After living in Florida and Rome, he now resides in Philadelphia, where he likes “the bouquet of urban decay. You have a lot of abandoned structures that come in a glorious array of shapes and sizes. There is something post-apocalyptic about these buildings that I find wonderfully attractive.”

Nature is also a significant source of influence. “If you try to draw a tree from your imagination and then compare it to even the most banal and commonplace tree found in nature,” he says, “the original will always outmaneuver you. I think everyone should draw from life, at least from time to time, because if they did, they would appreciate how incredible and sophisticated everything in the natural world is. You can think in your head, ‘Sure, I know, even a boring tree is sophisticated.’ but it isn’t until you use the process of drawing that you really and truly understand it. Through drawing, you learn to ‘see’ the world around you better.”

Davison earned his BFA in drawing from the University of Central Florida, where he credits Professor Robert Rivers with convincing him to take drawing from a hobby to a more serious endeavor. “He let me know that if I wanted to improve at drawing, I needed to stop competing with the other students in the class, and realize that I need to start competing with the heavy hitters from art history. When I draw a hand, I’m thinking about the best hands from history, perhaps Dürer or Schiele. Is it possible to out-do them? Is it possible to draw better than that?”

Contemporary design, drawing, and painting are further influences, as Davison believes it’s important for artists to “speak the language of their time.” The tough part of attempting this, he says, “is making something that is relevant to this rather specific and timely conversation, while at the same time striving to make something fundamentally universal and timeless. I think the great artists were the ones who managed to do both.”

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These themes of universality and timelessness can be felt in Davison's drawings: blurred lines between man and animal, civil and primitive, beauty and morbidity, even life and death, abound through his use of transfiguration and symbolism. Another striking series, "Treasure Drawings," evokes violence in nature, and a morbid, fleshy portrayal of forms through the use of deep reds and pinks leaves you both unsettled and extremely curious.

The act of creating art, for Davison, is spurred by his own passions. It also helps him to release pent-up energy. "I'm not fond of the term 'Art Therapy,'" he says, "but I admit I am a far less agreeable person if I have been kept from the studio for days on end. If for some reason I can't get to the studio for a few days, I find myself singing, playing whatever is in my hands like a drum, humming, tapping, etc."

Even Davison's working style could stand as an artistic performance, with a studio routine that involves "lots of loud music on big headphones, whiskey, grunting, dancing... There are, of course, other times when I am quiet, contemplative, and orderly about my approach. but the real creativity happens during those passionate sessions."